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TAGS: PREL KWBG KPAL FR SY

SUBJECT: GAZA: SARKOZY LOOKING FOR SARG SUPPORT OF
CEASEFIRE

Classified By: CDA Maura Connelly, American Embassy Damascus, Reasons 1
.4 b and d.

¶1. (C) Summary: French DCM Nicolas Suran (strictly protect) confirmed January 4 that President Sarkozy would visit Damascus January 6 for three hours (approximately 10 am to 1 pm). Sarkozy would arrive after spending the previous day in Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Ramallah. Sarkozy would then depart for afternoon meetings in Beirut and the French UNIFIL contingent before returning back to Paris. Sarkozy's main objective will be to convince President Asad to press Hamas to scale back its conditions to reach a ceasefire. End Summary

¶2. (C) According to Suran, Sarkozy's one-day trip to the region will overlap with an EU Troika mission to Cairo, Ramallah, and Amman consisting of Czech FM Karel Schwarzenberg, Swedish FM Carl Bildt, EU High Representative for Common Foreign and Security Policy Javier Solana, and EU External Relations Commissioner Benita Ferrero-Waldner. (Note: FM Kouchner, reported Suran, would travel with the Troika to Cairo, after which he planned to join Sarkozy's party in Ramallah or Jerusalem. As of January 5, there were still uncertainty about whether Abu Mazen would be in Ramallah or in New York. We understand Solana will visit Damascus on the afternoon of January 6.) To Suran's knowledge, there had been no advance work done in Syria by Sarkozy's office and no consideration of meeting with Hamas representatives, which would contradict EU policy.

¶3. (C) Suran surmised that Sarkozy saw an opportunity to fill a policy vacuum caused by the end of the current U.S. administration. Though it remained unclear what the French President's specific message would entail, the goal of the trip would be to consult with regional leaders (including President Asad) to promote a "workable" ceasefire in Gaza. The GOF believed an immediate solution was necessary to preserve the Palestinian and Syrian peace tracks and relieve mounting pressure on moderate Arab regimes like Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, which would find themselves unable to withstand public opinion in favor of opposing Israel's military operation. This situation would only become more desperate as Israel's ground offensive intensified, Suran added.

¶4. (C) While it remained unclear whether Sarkozy would make any headway with the Israelis (Suran characterized FM Livni's January 1 meetings in Paris as "surreal"), the goal in Damascus would be to convince Bashar to push Hamas more forcefully to agree to a ceasefire with minimal conditions.

Syria, by comparison, would be likely to resist any attempt by Sarkozy to deliver an ultimatum to Hamas. In Suran's estimation, Asad would probably listen to what Sarkozy had to say and urge him to recognize that Israel, not Hamas, was the party lacking flexibility. Suran predicted Asad might push Sarkozy to support UN Security Council condemnation of Israel, but said France would not be willing to take such a one-sided stand.

¶ 15. (C) Suran assessed Asad was balancing a range of considerations. He doubted whether Syria would agree to putting public pressure on Hamas or other Palestinian groups, since Bashar's image had benefited considerably from supporting Arab resistance against Israeli "aggression," at the expense of moderate regimes in Egypt, the Palestinian Authority, and Jordan. Bashar's willingness to meet with Iranian Supreme National Security Council Secretary Saeed Jalili on January 3 was another indicator Asad was trying to maintain his credentials in the resistance camp. Moreover, Syria wanted to show that now, no deal could be made without Syria's involvement, argued Suran.

¶ 16. (C) At the same time, the French Embassy here believes Asad wants to avoid appearing as an obstacle to a diplomatic solution in order to show the new U.S. administration he can be a reliable partner. The SARG had not been thrilled by Hamas' reluctance to extend the June 16th ceasefire with Israel, especially since Israel's military operation had come unexpectedly and led to a freeze in indirect peace talks on the Golan. A high-ranking MFA source had told Suran that Asad recognized returning to the Golan track would require

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resolution of the Gaza crisis but Syria did not want to be out in front of this process and instead would probably wait to get behind a solution only after it appeared to be gaining real momentum.

¶ 17. (C) At this point, Suran continued, events on the ground were quickly changing the stakes. These developments would increase pressure on the GOI, while complicating the issues Sarkozy hoped to advance. Suran said that the parties to a ceasefire remained unclear. Israel was obvious, but would it negotiate with Hamas, rely on Egypt or others to mediate, or would a plan emerge from another actor (Jordan or even the extremely weakened Palestinian Authority) that might serve as a basis for moving forward? Sarkozy would be hoping to come up with a viable formula that could pass muster in the region and in New York, Suran said, side-stepping his own question.

¶ 18. (C) Comment: While Sarkozy's visit may reflect a desire to leverage his new relationship with Syria to increase French regional clout, Suran's assessment of Syrian double-edged objectives strikes us as largely reasonable. In solidarity with the Arab street, Syrian press is playing up events in Gaza as a "holocaust" and accusing the Egyptian government of collaborating with Israel's military operations, while Syrian officials are now calling for UN Security Council condemnation of Israel. But Syria's affinity with Hamas appears to have its limits. Thus far, the SARG has actively restrained HAMAS activists from organizing protests inside and outside Palestinian refugee camps, and Bashar is privately indicating to American and other visitors that he desires to resume indirect talks with Israel as soon as possible.

CONNELLY